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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9965
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1826
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001729

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER;
BAGHDAD FOR KAREN BRONSON FOR AMB. SATTERFIELD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/04/2017

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MESSAGE TO USG: BERRI WANTS A PRESIDENT
ELECTED ON TIME (AND HE WANTS OUR PROPOSALS FOR NAMES)

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Resigned Minister of Health Mohammed Khalifeh, close to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, delivered a surprising message to the Ambassador in a November 2 meeting: Berri really wants a president to be elected by the midnight November 23 deadline. This goes against speculation that Berri, backed by Hizballah, wishes to extend the status quo, leaving President Emile Lahoud in power indefinitely, because Berri believes time is on the side of March 8 forces. Khalifeh assured the Ambassador multiple times that Berri, who requested that Khalifeh communicate this to the Ambassador, is indeed hoping for a president to be elected on time, and that he is confident he will not be overridden by Hizballah, Syria, or Iran.

2. (C) Khalifeh urged the Ambassador to name the candidate desired by the USG because Berri wants a candidate agreed upon prior to convening parliament for elections. The Ambassador, as always, refused to partake in the name game, but took the opportunity to feel out Berri's envoy on a variety of candidates making the news. Khalifeh did not reveal a name himself, but rejected most of the names in the news. The other point Khalifeh emphasized was that a candidate must be agreed upon before Berri will convene parliament. End summary.

BERRI "100 PERCENT" WANTS A PRESIDENT

3. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with resigned Minister of Health Mohammed Khalifeh, a friend of Speaker Nabih Berri, on November 2. Berri sent Khalifeh to deliver the message to the Ambassador, prior to the November 6 meeting between Berri and the Ambassador, that Berri wants a president elected by the November 23 deadline. The purpose of the message was to move the Ambassador, and presumably March 14 leaders, to a serious process of naming candidates to reach an agreement before elections are held. Khalifeh emphatically stated that Berri does not wish to extend the status quo. In response to the Ambassador's inquiry as to whether Berri has the support of Hizballah, Syria, and Iran in agreeing on a candidate, Khalifeh assured us that Hizballah will follow along, even if the group is not totally satisfied. Khalifeh said Berri made repeated references to avoiding what happened in 1975 when political stalemate led

to civil war. Berri believes that, in the event there is no election, he and his opposition March 8 allies will not be able to control the smaller pro-Syrian parties, which may take to the streets and resist. March 8 won't resort to violence, Berri communicated through Khalifeh, but it is unclear how the pro-Syrian parties will react.

TIME TO NAME A CANDIDATE

14. (C) Berri is looking for the USG to name its candidate, according to Khalifeh. Asserting that if the international community really wanted former MP Nassib Lahoud to become president, it could get him elected, Khalifeh said that the time is up, and an agreement must be reached. He implied that an agreement would need USG support and therefore urged the Ambassador to reveal the USG's hand. The Ambassador repeated the USG position not to name candidates and, instead, to support a Lebanese-chosen president. Khalifeh seemed slightly dismayed, as if the breakthrough indeed relied upon foreign intervention. Khalifeh said that Berri is not playing games and feels constrained by time. He said that Berri is pushing heavily for an agreement, and in the absence of one, there cannot be elections. Regarding Berri's meetings with Saad Hariri, Khalifeh said they are positive, but to a point. Names must be discussed, and a consensus must be reached, he insisted.

REVIEWING CONSENSUS CANDIDATES

15. (C) The Ambassador explored with Khalifeh Berri's thinking on the candidates making headlines this week. Berri reportedly crossed off MP Jean Obeid, despite their friendship, because he knows March 14 is against him.

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Khalifeh rejected Aoun, Sleiman, and Salameh. He continued, crossing off Boueiz because he is not impressive and Daccash because "he doesn't seem like someone who can help the situation." Rizk also is not a contender, Khalifeh said, adding that by process of elimination of the names making headlines this week, that leaves Robert Ghanem, Michel Edde, Michel Khoury, and Charles Chidiac (with Khalifeh clearly mentioning the last candidate merely for amusement's sake). Khalifeh may have revealed Berri's hand when he inquired whether the "Christians would get on board" with Ghanem. Edde and Khoury were mentioned, but with disinterest, and Chidiac was twice referred to jokingly. Again pleading to the Ambassador, Khalifeh said, "We cannot pick names ourselves."

BERRI AVOIDING A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

16. (C) Berri seemingly has taken into account what he perceives as the U.S. position, Khalifeh said. Specifically, Berri ruled out Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman as March 8's candidate in part because he believes the USG would oppose the required constitutional amendment. Khalifeh confidently told us that any appeal for Sleiman as president is finished. Berri tasked three individuals to research whether Salameh would require an amendment to become the president, and they concluded that, while Salameh's situation differs from Sleiman in that he is not the head of the army, an amendment would be needed for him to become president. Berri does not oppose such an amendment, said Khalifeh, but is trying to avoid it. Later in the meeting, Khalifeh said that Berri would support an amendment on the condition that everyone wants one.

DESPITE HIZBALLAH BACKING,
BERRI WILL NOT NAME AOUN

17. (C) Berri told Khalifeh that Hizballah will leave the

selection of the president to Berri. Berri noted that if it were up to Hizballah, General Michel Aoun would be its preferred candidate. Khalifeh said that Hizballah would not work to get Aoun elected for a full six-year term, but would support him publicly for a shorter term as an interim president in the absence of agreement on anyone else. Hizballah would then lead him into believing he will be elected eventually, while undermining him over an interim period until a president is elected, and carrying out separate plans. Khalifeh reported that it was a moot point whether Hizballah wanted elections or not because on the issue of the president, "Berri will not listen to anyone." Khalifeh acknowledged that Syria does not allow Berri to meet with certain people, but affirmed that Berri believes that he is free from Hizballah, Syrian, and Iran, to move forward on elections.

BERRI SUPPORTS UNSCR 1701;
WON'T REJECT 1559

18. (C) On the topic of disarming Hizballah, Khalifeh said that Berri supports UNSCR 1701 because it protects people in the south in particular, but also because it benefits all Lebanese. He also said Hizballah would not now have the moral and social support it enjoyed in the July 2006 war, suggesting that the issue of arms should not be the focus. Khalifeh agreed that Berri would not outright reject UNSCR 1559, but would put the debate aside for the time being, while reinforcing his support for 1701.

LEBANESE VISITORS IN WASHINGTON

19. (C) Khalifeh commented on the number of Lebanese officials visiting Washington recently, noting that Berri has not been himself to the U.S. in years. If the Speaker were to receive an invitation, speculated Khalifeh, Berri would accept, but not until after the elections because he does not believe a visit to the U.S. at this time would help him resolve the current impasse. Consistent with Berri's thinking, Khalifeh also pushed for some kind of rapprochement between the U.S. and Syria, as an important step that would help Lebanon.
FELTMAN